

Details of kids' health care bill discussed

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HELENA - Changes will be made in a proposed 2008 ballot measure to extend health coverage to thousands of uninsured children in Montana, as Gov. Brian Schweitzer and state Auditor John Morrison try to agree on what they'll support.

The measure still plans to expand government-funded insurance plans, such as the Children's Health Insurance Plan and Medicaid.

But Morrison, the chief proponent of the measure, said Monday it no longer will include a mandate that could require some parents to buy private health insurance.

Morrison, who's also the state insurance commissioner, submitted proposed ballot measure language to state officials in late October.

He said then that Montanans greatly support expanding health coverage for children in low- and moderate-income families, and that the measure would give them a chance in 2008 to express their political will at the ballot box.

It's estimated that 37,000 kids in Montana are without health insurance.

Since mid-November, Morrison's office and the Schweitzer administration have been discussing how much the proposal might cost the state treasury, if voters approve it.

Morrison said he'd like to have the governor's support for the measure.

"We want to make sure we have as much support for it as possible," he said. Schweitzer "has shared his thoughts, and we revised the initiative. I think it accomplishes much the same thing, but it takes a little difference approach."

Sarah Elliott, spokeswoman for Schweitzer, said the governor wants to see the final details and cost impact of the proposal before deciding whether to get behind it.

Morrison said he expects new language will be hammered out this month and that the ballot measure should be ready for signature-gathering by January. It needs the signatures of 22,300 registered voters to qualify for the November 2008 ballot.

Here are some of the provisions and possible changes under discussion for the ballot measure language.

- An increase in the income eligibility for CHIP from its current level of 175 percent of the federal poverty level to 250 percent.

Right now, a family of four earning up to \$36,140 a year qualifies for CHIP, which provides government-funded health insurance kids who don't qualify for any other government health program. About 15,700 children in Montana are covered by CHIP now.

The change would allow a family of four to make up to \$51,600 and have their kids qualify for CHIP coverage.

- Possible government credits to help families earning between 225 percent and 300 percent of the poverty level to afford to place their children on private health insurance plans that already cover the parents.
- Expanded eligibility for children to be covered by Medicaid, the state-federal program that pays medical bills for the poor.

- Some sort of effort to make it easier for people to enroll in Medicaid and CHIP.
- Elimination of the initiative's original language that would require parents to buy private health insurance for their children if they didn't qualify for CHIP or Medicaid.
- The changes would be contingent on federal approval and federal funding for the expansions of CHIP and Medicaid in Montana.
- Revenue from the state insurance premium tax would be used to fund at least part of the proposal. That money currently goes into the general state treasury.

The debate between Morrison's office and the Schweitzer administration focuses mostly on the proposal's cost, and whether the state can afford it.

Morrison believes the proposal could cost about \$20 million a year, or a bit more. Schweitzer administration estimates have been in the \$30 million to \$35 million range, he said.

David Ewer, the governor's budget director, said his office and Morrison's office have yet to agree on what the cost would be, but he said it would be "very expensive."

"My worry is, how do I get it to fit with all of the other things we have to pay for?" Ewer said last week.

"I don't have a good sense of what the (future) revenue picture is going to be.

"I have always been one to carefully manage expectations. We need to be very thoughtful about what expectations we should have for CHIP."